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The Ethics of Teaching for Social Justice A Framework for Exploring the Intellectual and Moral Virtues of Social Justice Educators

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Abstract

Pursuing social justice in education raises ethical questions about teaching practice that have not been fully addressed in the social justice literature. Hytten (2015) initiated a valuable way forward in developing an ethics of social justice educators, drawing on virtue ethics.

In this paper, I provide additional support to this effort by arguing that a virtue approach to ethics of teaching is in fact compatible with responsiveness to social context in teaching. I then propose a refined framework for considering the virtues of teachers, one which asks us to identify virtues relevant to teaching within the broad categories of intellectual and moral virtue. For any potential virtue of social justice educators, we should then consider (a) its characteristic psychology, (b) its relationship to the aim of social justice, and (c) both the internal and external conditions for its success. I use this framework to elaborate one particular intellectual virtue in teaching for social justice, open-mindedness.

This article is a response to:

Hytten, K. (2015). Ethics in teaching for democracy and social justice. *Democracy & Education* 23(2), Article 1. Available online at <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol23/iss2/1>

EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL justice has a long history in the United States and has gained prominence as a primary aim of schooling. Our teachers are tasked with promoting social justice in their classrooms. Pursuing this educational aim raises ethical questions about teaching practice, questions that have not been fully addressed in the social justice literature. In her article “Ethics in Teaching for Democracy and Social Justice,” Hytten (2015) suggested drawing on work in ethics of teaching as a resource for social justice teachers. By bridging these two literatures, she suggested a productive way forward in developing an “ethics of activist teaching” (p. 2).

Educators for social justice must balance their aim of promoting social justice and their responsibility not to indoctrinate students. Hytten (2015) proposed consideration of the ethics of teaching—with particular attention to virtue ethics in philosophy of education—as a tool for striking this balance. Drawing on

Sockett’s (2009) work conceptualizing teacher dispositions as virtues, Hytten suggested dividing virtues of teachers into three categories and discussed one example in each category: reflective humility in the category of character, open-mindedness in the category of intellect, and sympathetic attentiveness in the category of care. However, Hytten hedged on the value of virtue ethics, pointing to “the universal language of virtues” that does not give adequate attention to context (p. 6). She proposed considering virtues as a way to prompt reflection but stopped short of

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presenting a principled argument for the value of virtues in social justice education.

Here, I expand on Hytten's (2015) consideration of ethics in social justice education by first arguing that a virtue approach to ethics of teaching is in fact compatible with giving due regard the role of social context in teaching. I then suggest that using insights from philosophical work in virtue ethics and virtue epistemology provides a useful means of refining the framework that Sockett (2009) proposed and Hytten utilized in discussion of ethics in teaching. Rather than dividing virtues into the overlapping categories of character, intellect, and care, I propose a simplified consideration into intellectual and moral virtues that support social justice.

Philosophical work on moral and intellectual virtue then provides tools for further developing an ethics of social justice education. For any proposed virtue of educators for social justice, we should consider (a) its characteristic psychology, (b) its relationship to the aim of social justice, and (c) both the internal and external conditions for its success. Attending to these conditions for success builds the importance of context into the resulting teacher ethics. In the final substantive section, I take open-mindedness—which Hytten (2015) considered as an intellectual virtue—and demonstrate how the virtue framework I suggest can be used to elaborate particular virtues of social justice educators.

Virtues and Social Justice Education

Accreditation frameworks for teacher preparation focus on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that teacher candidates should acquire. The emphasis on dispositions opens the door for considering the virtues of teaching. The conception of disposition relevant to teaching is that of “dispositions to act with awareness and intention” where “judgment is always necessary, as dispositions don't dictate their own application” (Sockett, 2009, p. 295). Take as an example, fairness—a professional disposition identified in the standards of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2008). Teachers who are disposed to be fair are predicted to act in ways that are fair; they are aware that they are being fair and intend for their actions to promote fairness. These fair teachers must use their professional judgment to determine which actions promote fairness based on the particular context. Virtues are a particular subset of dispositions. As presented by Sockett (2009), virtues are dispositions that are intrinsically motivated, result from the individual's initiative, and require overcoming internal and external obstacles (p. 296). Fairness understood as a virtue requires that fair teachers are intrinsically motivated to treat students fairly and are not motivated, say, solely by external assessments. Fair teachers seek to be fair across various teaching contexts and work to overcome obstacles that challenge their enactment of fairness.

Considering virtues is a useful approach to identifying desirable dispositions of teachers when taking into account both their moral and their intellectual obligations to students. Virtues are internal to a community of practice with a shared good (MacIntyre, 1985). The identification of virtues is role contingent; that is, the set of virtues of teachers will differ from the set of virtues

of political leaders or scientists. Teachers play a central role in both the intellectual and the moral quality of students' educational experiences (Hytten, 2015, p. 3). Considering this multifaceted role, both intellectual and moral virtues valuable in teaching may be identified. In considering the ethics of teaching for social justice in particular, the set of virtues identified should be responsive to the aim of social justice and teachers' role in achieving this aim.

Hytten (2015) presented a virtue approach to teacher ethics as a tool for reflection on social justice educators' ethical responsibilities but at the same time acknowledged concerns that virtue theories may be too individualistic or too universalizing. She worried about identifying a set of virtues as universally valuable to teachers and about identifying what it means to enact these virtues in a universal way that ignores contextual differences. I respond briefly to these worries.

By our understanding virtue ethics as role dependent and specific to a community of practice, space is made for consideration of context. Although all people may not agree on the characteristics that are virtuous or the behaviors that exhibit them, an ethics of teaching for social justice only requires that social justice educators identify virtues within their communities of practice. Virtue ethics as described above is responsive to person and situation, as opposed to universal rule-based (deontological) systems of ethics or codes of professional conduct. Identifying the virtues of social justice educators requires identifying those dispositions that support social justice. If we identify compassion or open-mindedness as valuable traits in the pursuit of social justice, we still leave open the question of how teachers should act in any given situation to be compassionate or open-minded. Virtue ethics requires individual judgment based on context as the individual seeks to be virtuous.

Now consider individual responsibility in virtue ethics. For any virtue, there may be both internal and external obstacles to its development and exercise. On the one hand, virtuous agents must overcome these obstacles, placing responsibility at the individual level. On the other hand, teachers are only one part of education systems seeking social justice. If obstacles exist in the system that prevent teachers from exercising the virtues that support justice, then consideration of virtue ethics points to the need for systemic change. Take, for example, an education system that evaluates teachers solely on the basis of student achievement on standardized assessments. At the same time, these teachers still are expected to be fair and to help all students learn. By considering the conditions needed to support teaching virtues, we can identify ethical responsibilities beyond the individual as well. I elaborate on these conditions below.

A Framework for Virtues in Teaching

Taking virtue ethics as a useful approach in considering the ethical obligations of educators and, in particular, educators for social justice, we may choose to use different conceptual frameworks for developing an ethics of teaching. Hytten (2015) followed Sockett (2009) in using three—admittedly overlapping—categories of virtues: character, intellect, and care. Both Sockett and Hytten have justified these categories by stating that they are relevant to

teachers. Sockett explained the utility of this framework as follows: “*Character* describes the kind of person the teacher is. *Intellect* is the teacher’s stock-in-trade, however the curriculum is construed. Teachers have children placed in their *care*” (p. 296, original emphasis). Although I do not disagree that each of these categories as described is relevant to teaching, the lack of conceptual clarity in their delineation raises questions about the value of this categorization as a foundation for an ethics of teaching. The category of character appears to cover both moral and intellectual virtues, as evidenced in Hytten’s discussion of reflective humility as an example of both moral and intellectual components. Intellect, then, appears to focus more narrowly on intellectual virtue, and finally, care seems like a particular type of moral virtue concerned with teachers’ relationships to students.

I suggest simplifying and clarifying this framework to include the intellectual and moral virtues of teachers. Intellectual virtues are the characteristics of good persons qua learners, the characteristics of individuals who pursue epistemic goods in admirable ways; moral virtues are the characteristics of good persons qua persons. Both of these broad categories are relevant to teachers, who have both moral and intellectual responsibilities with regards to students. Using these broad categories, we may consider teachers as a community of practice in order to identify the individual virtues that are part of an ethics of teaching. Any proposed virtue for educators should play a role in promoting the aims of the education community (e.g., social justice).

Beginning with the broad categories of intellectual and moral virtue, I suggest bringing in insights from philosophical work on virtue ethics (e.g., Foot, 2002; MacIntyre, 1985) and the growing subfield of virtue epistemology (e.g., Baehr, 2011; Montmarquet, 1987; Zagzebski, 1996). Virtues are intrinsically motivated and require overcoming obstacles both internally and in the world. For any proposed virtue of social justice educators, we should, thus, consider (a) its characteristic motive, and (b) both the internal and the external conditions for its success.

Let me expand taking the category of intellectual virtue. In identifying the characteristic motive for any particular intellectual virtue, we should consider the requisite characteristics at two levels: those that are shared by all intellectual virtues and those that are specific to the virtue under consideration (Adler, 2004; Baehr, 2011; Montmarquet, 1987; Zagzebski, 1996). All intellectual virtues share a common aim involving some form of attachment to the epistemic good (e.g., knowledge and understanding). For Zagzebski (1996), this attachment to the epistemic good comes in the form of motivation. In addition to this general aim, each individual intellectual virtue also has a specific motive or characteristic psychology that identifies the way in which it contributes to the pursuit of the epistemic goods of knowledge and/or understanding. It is the specific motive or psychological character that distinguishes one intellectual virtue from another.

In addition to these motivational components, intellectual virtues may also require conditions for success, which may include either internal or external requirements. Internal success raises questions about intrapersonal conditions. It may involve overcoming psychological obstacles that prevent one from achieving the

aims of the virtue, such as being incapable of expanding one’s understanding due to fear of opening up one’s worldview to change. External success, on the other hand, is concerned with interpersonal, contextual, and societal conditions. It may involve overcoming obstacles in the world, such as working within an education system with limited resources. Within virtue epistemology, there is debate about whether reliability is a necessary component of virtue, whether intellectual virtues must reliably lead to the epistemic good (Baehr, 2007). For the purpose of identifying a useful framework for considering the virtues of teachers, we need not answer this question. Regardless of whether reliable success is necessary for attributions of the virtue, attending to the internal and external conditions that inhibit or support virtuous teaching will provide valuable insight for individual teachers and for schools and systems of education.

In developing an ethics of teaching for social justice that uses this virtue framework, we need to identify intellectual and moral virtues that contribute to the aim of social justice. For each relevant virtue, the first task is to understand its characteristic motive, and the second is to examine why it is important for social justice. Third, we should consider the conditions needed for teachers to successfully follow through on this motive across different contexts, attending to both internal and external conditions for success.

Open-Mindedness as an Intellectual Virtue of Teachers

Let’s now consider open-mindedness, which Hytten (2015) explored as an example of virtue in the category of intellect. I use the framework outlined above, demonstrating its utility in informing our understanding of individual virtues and the conditions needed to support them. Open-mindedness is worthy of further exploration because it is widely valued by virtue epistemologists as a vital intellectual virtue and by philosophers of education as a vital disposition of teachers as well as an important educational aim for students.

Let us begin by considering the motives that are associated with open-mindedness. As an intellectual virtue, open-mindedness is directed at the epistemic good. Much discussion of open-mindedness has taken place in the philosophy of education literature, particularly in the work of Hare (Hare 1979, 1985; Hare & McLaughlin, 1998). More recent discussions of open-mindedness have tended either to challenge (Adler, 2004; Gardner, 1996; Riggs, 2010) or to defend (Siegel, 2009; Spiegel 2012) Hare’s conception of the virtue. Previous work on open-mindedness has focused on its relationship to the pursuit of knowledge and of true belief as a component of knowledge, overlooking its relationship to understanding. Whereas knowledge is concerned with discrete beliefs, understanding involves entire subject matters. To understand a subject, the agent must grasp its structure. I have argued that a robust conception of open-mindedness as an intellectual virtue should account for its relationship to both knowledge and understanding (2013). Turning to the specific motive associated with open-mindedness, I suggest that open-minded agents are motivated to give due regard to available evidence and argument when

forming new beliefs and understandings and when maintaining or revising already established beliefs and understandings.

In her discussion of open-mindedness, Hytten (2015) was primarily focused on knowledge (e.g., teachers should be open to revising their beliefs when they are in error). At the same time, in her discussion of social justice education, Hytten often appealed to the types of understanding that teachers need—for example, understanding of “their own positionality in relation to inequalities” (p. 3). By incorporating understanding, alongside knowledge, into a conception of open-mindedness as a virtue for social justice educators, we emphasize teachers’ role not just as conveyers of facts but as central actors tasked with fostering students’ development while embedded within a particular community. Open-mindedness is, thus, a virtue of social justice educators because it disposes them to seek deeper understanding of their students, their communities, and their fields, understanding that is indispensable in the pursuit of social justice.

Before moving on to consider the third element of the virtue framework (conditions for success), I introduce one further consideration of the value of open-mindedness as a virtue in the pursuit of social justice. Recently, the concept of epistemic justice has received increased attention, notably in the work of Fricker (2007, 2013), who has developed a theory of epistemic injustice. The concept of epistemic injustice draws attention to the possibility that students may be treated unjustly not only in their capacity as members of democratic society but also in their capacity as knowers. Considering epistemic justice in relation to social justice education, open-mindedness arguably plays a role in preventing epistemic injustice in schools. Teachers and students who are open-minded are motivated to give proper consideration to the epistemic claims of others, which in turn supports the aims of democratic and social justice education. Thus, valuing open-mindedness as a virtue for both teachers and students contributes to epistemic justice by helping students to be treated fairly within schools and outside of schools in broader democratic society as students move into their role as mature citizens.

Now, let’s consider the conditions that support teachers in following through on the open-minded motive across different contexts. As described above, these conditions may be either internal or external. Examining the internal conditions for success draws attention to intrapersonal obstacles that may prevent teachers from being open to revising their beliefs and expanding their understandings. Take two examples: intellectual arrogance and intellectual cowardice.

Teachers who are intellectually arrogant fail to acknowledge that they are fallible cognitive agents whose knowledge and understanding can be improved. This arrogance may prevent a social justice educator from being open to considering information that might challenge his or her current perspectives. Say a veteran teacher has developed classroom practices that she believes best promote fairness for all students. Periodically, students challenge some of these practices, attesting that they are being treated unfairly. Rather than take seriously these students’ concerns and use the interaction to improve her understanding of her students

and consider adjusting her practices, the teacher’s arrogance prevents her from being open-minded.

Teachers who exhibit intellectual cowardice are unwilling to reconsider certain valued beliefs or understandings in the pursuit of the intellectual good. They fail to be open-minded because of fear of opening up their commitments to revision, especially when these commitments are important to their identities. Imagine a novice teacher who is motivated to treat all his students fairly and to improve his knowledge and understanding of his students, the community and school context, and his field. At the same time, he has strong unexamined attachments to some views about the community where he is teaching, views that form an important part of his identity. As he interacts with his students’ parents and the broader community, he has the opportunity to reconsider these views, to be open-minded. However, he is afraid of opening up these views to examination and exhibits intellectual cowardice.

These two examples are intended to illustrate how consideration of the internal conditions necessary for success in possessing or following through on the motive associated with a particular intellectual virtue may help us to build more robust conceptions of the virtues of teachers, identifying their relationship to other virtues as well (e.g., intellectual humility and intellectual courage).

Thus far, we have considered the motives of open-minded teachers and the internal obstacles that may challenge their open-mindedness. Turning to the external conditions that impede or support teachers in enacting open-mindedness allows us to introduce the importance of social context as well as individual responsibility. Teachers’ success in being motivated to give due regard to new information in order to improve their knowledge and understanding and in following through on this motive depends in part of the context in which they are working. We can consider context, for example, at school and system levels. Relevant questions include: Do school policies limit teachers’ control over pedagogical content or methods in ways that undermine open-mindedness? Do system-wide assessment policies promote closed-minded practices over open-minded ones? Do professional codes of conduct limit teachers’ interactions with students in ways that prevent open-minded engagement? By taking seriously the external conditions that support teachers in developing and exhibiting virtues that advance educational aims such as social justice, we can prevent a virtue ethics approach to teacher ethics from ignoring the role of context and the ethical responsibilities of other actors in education systems.

Conclusion

Hytten (2015) initiated a valuable way forward in developing an ethics of social justice educators, drawing on virtue ethics. I have added support to this effort by arguing that a virtue approach to ethics of teaching is in fact compatible with giving due regard to the role of social context in teaching. I then proposed a refined framework for considering the virtues of teachers, one that asks us to identify virtues relevant to teaching within the broad categories of intellectual and moral virtue. For any potential virtue of social justice educators, we should then consider (a) its characteristic psychology, (b) its relationship to the aim of social justice, and (c) both the internal and external conditions for its success.

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